

Diving with the Yemaya II in Columbia's

Malpelo Island

Text and photos by
Wolfgang Pölzer





Good size scorpionfish hiding from the strong current. PREVIOUS PAGE: You can even find some spots with colorful coral life on Malpelo

Three of world's best shark spots are located far off the coast of Central and South American, in the eastern Pacific Ocean. The least known of them, the tiny Colombian island of Malpelo, together with Galapagos and Cocos, create a "golden triangle" for big fish fans.

The current tugged at our fins. Severe threshold enables us to the rhythm of the long-drawn swell incessantly a few meters to the front and back. We had long since become accustomed to the incessant beeping of the dive computer display, which did not recognize the rapid changes in pressure. Even here,

a good 20 meters down, the forces of nature had no doubt who was the strongest.

Swarms of doctor-, handle- and butterflyfish could be on anything of it and seemed to dance around us effortlessly. Moray eels, with bodies as thick as a person's arms, were not peering out of their residential holes with only their heads as one usually finds them, but meandered out in the open virtually defenseless between the sparsely colonized rocks. Mostly flat, sharp barnacles were growing on the outcroppings; beautiful pink-colored coralline algae covered the jagged volcanic rock.

A dark gap yawned before us. Not quite three meters wide, but certainly more than ten feet tall, we were lured into the pitch black rock. Startled by

our headlights, a handsome whitetip reef shark peered at us in the distance. Shortly after, we were blocked by a wall of Blaustreifenschnappern in the way. They seemed reluctant to give us room to pass.

Behind the school of fish, a deep blue shadow loomed. The slot-shaped cavity turned out to be about a 20-meter-long tunnel. Shortly before starting their impressive romp, Dickkopf mackerel made their sickle-shaped fins; they were incredibly quick and agile. During the slow ascent to the surface, we were honored by a squad of eagle rays. The graceful animals soared in formation far below us on the barren rocky reef.

After leaving the reef behind, it seemed a long time after we shot our surface marker buoy to notify the dive boat to come to us that they finally



School of snappers at the dive site Cathedral



noticed us. There was extremely great danger in being abandoned, unnoticed out here. Being a good 500 kilometers from the Colombian coast and far away from any shipping routes was really uncomfortable. After a few minutes, neither substrate nor reef could be seen.

An invisible current came at us through the eastern Pacific. At a depth of around five meters, the sea suddenly turned dark ahead of us. Had the current taken us back to the rocks? No, it was a gigantic wall of jacks coming towards us -- the biggest school I have ever seen. Thousands of silvery fish bodies orbited around us, enveloped us, obstructing the view between buddies. We enjoyed the feeling of being part of the swarm for a few minutes. But just as suddenly as it started, the



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Jackfish and grouper hunting in front of a cave; The few corals are either hard and tiny or soft and very flexible to endure the strong currents; Resting grouper; Moray eels are very common at Malpelo and almost always out in the open and swimming freely



Silky shark (left)
Wrasse (below)

Malpelo

MV YEMAYA II

YEAR: 1965. Originally built as a supply ship for oil platforms, then a private yacht, floating casino and escort vessel for deep sea fishing. Finally, in 2008 completely renovated and converted into a dive boat.

CREW: Seven-man crew plus two dive guides

LENGTH: 35 feet

SHIP TYPE: Steel ship motor yacht.

ENGINE: 1,300 hp diesel

CABINS: Two double cabins including bath / WC, four double cabins with private sink but shared shower / toilet for two adjoining rooms, as well as two large master cabins. Maximum occupancy is 16 guests. All cabins with individually controlled air-conditioning is not.

FACILITIES: Ample space, upper deck with covered dining tables, lounge and sun deck. Spacious dive deck with lights and camera charger (110V), air shower, two sinks and two showers. Air-conditioned lounge with flat screen TV and DVD player in the lower deck.

Two sturdy eight-meter fiberglass dinghy with 2x2 110 or 140 hp for 12 divers.

Two Air and Nitrox membrane compressor 1, 2 and 3 Water power generators.

ELECTRICITY: 24 hours 110 V, American flat plug (adapter needed) in each cabin, 220 V only in the engine room.



Giant school of jackfish (above); Tiny little corals blooming in the current (right)

swarm was gone. Visibility cleared as the mackerel left us to move with the current.

The otherwise empty desert-like blue sea, however, had another surprise in store for us. About two dozen tuna plowed past us. Their interest in us seemed extremely low. After a few seconds, we had the open ocean back to ourselves. But not for long.

First, only a shadow could be seen on the edge of our vision. I had a little more than a hunch, a hope. Yes, it was a shark. One, no two, no, a whole group! And then the numbers increased very quickly. Out of nowhere, the sharks suddenly appeared everywhere.

During the entire dive, we had hoped, feared that this would happen. Now, it had come true. We were surrounded by a vast amount of about

two-meter-long silky sharks! The lean, slightly golden, shimmering predators circled us, swam among us, enveloped us.

Their numbers were difficult to estimate; it was impossible to count them. Who knew how many were still out of sight? With over a hundred schools—some say even up to a thousand—these clusters of silky sharks are found only here at Malpelo and are unique in the world.

The animals seemed curious but not aggressive. Most did not come closer than five meters; some were brave and came within about two meters.

When others approached, they differed simply in their depth. Unfortunately, our air supply dwindled, as did the sharks, and all the schools of fish slowly lost their interest in us. We began our ascent.





MV YEMAYA II

VESSEL OWNER: Otmar Hanser, German, of Panama

EDUCATION: Only PADI nitrox (US\$170)

LANGUAGES: English, German, Spanish

DIVING REGULATIONS: Provides certification, log book and final medical confirmation. Minimum

QUALIFICATIONS: AOWD and 30 dives. We dive for safety on Malpelo (flow) only in groups.

MAXIMUM GROUP SIZE: 8 divers per guide.

MAXIMUM DEPTH: 40 meters.

REQUIRED SAFETY EQUIPMENT at the greatest possible buoy (preferably with 20-meter reel), a whistle and a small mirror. For every free diver is a transmitter of the GPS and radio-tracking system "Nautilus Lifeline" is available.

NATIONAL PARK FEES: Coiba: \$20 pr person pr trip Malpelo: \$85 pr person pr day Cocos: \$35 pr person pr day

NITROX 32% SURCHARGE: \$100 pr person per entire tour

SAFARI TOURS: Year-round 6-15 day tours mainly to Coiba and Malpelo. A few events per year to Cocos.

DECOMPRESSION CHAMBER: Panama City

Just below the surface, we saw an arrow-shaped something shoot toward us, stop about three feet away, turn and disappear just as quickly. We saw just enough to realize that our brief visitor was a marlin. What a dive!

Features of Malpelo

The tiny islands of Malpelo are located about 650 kilometers southeast of Cocos and around 1,200 kilometers northeast of Galapagos in the eastern Pacific. Malpelo is nothing more than the top of a huge undersea mountain range. The island's banks fall into the sea to a depth of about 4,000 meters. Up to eight different ocean currents meet here during the year, all of which bring nutrient-rich deep water, and explain the high volume of large fish.

Around the main island, about 300 meters high, are assembled a dozen small rugged crags; almost all their submerged cliffs and rocky slopes harbor excellent diving spots.

Local fauna include two endemic species of lizards, which thrive here almost exclusively,

as well as terns, gulls, frigate birds and masked boobies. The latter boast a population of nearly 30,000, and are the second largest colony of masked boobies in the world. Important to us divers, however, are the sharks of which there are still enough living around the small island group.

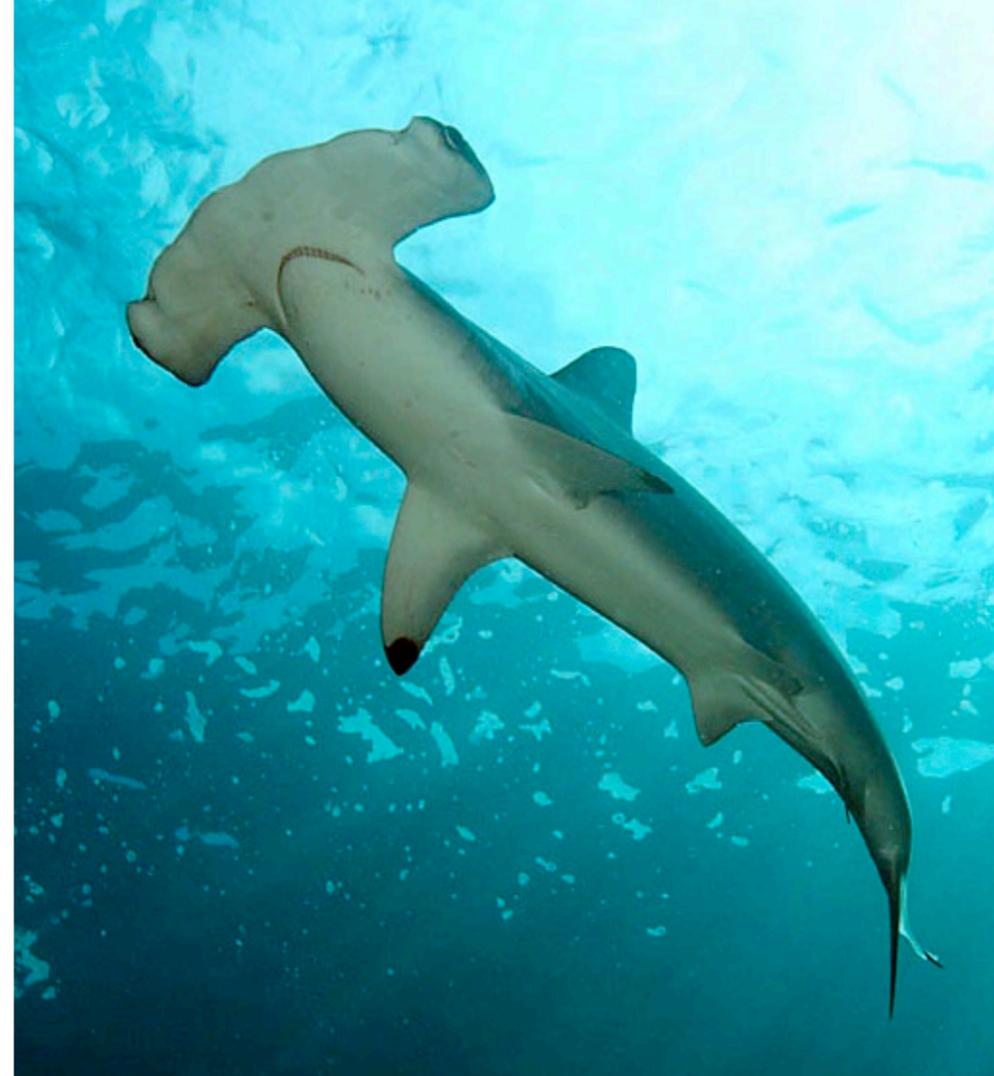
Sharks, sharks and more sharks...

In addition to the aforementioned silky sharks, there are huge schools of scalloped hammerhead sharks, Galapagos sharks, whitetip reef sharks, whale sharks and the rare shield tooth sharks (*Odontaspis ferox* or smalltooth sand tiger shark) which can be encountered only at depths below 50 meters.

Fortunately, the region was formally made into a protected marine reserve in 1995, and in 2006, got on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Far from the mainland coast and surrounded by legal and illegal international fishing fleets, it is



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Scorpionfish; Grouper getting cleaned by butterflyfish; Giant hawkfish; Sunset at the island of Malpelo



Hammerhead shark (left)

Malpelo

If you are lucky, you can see a school of up to 200 silky sharks! The only spot on Earth where this has been seen before (far left)

MV YEMAYA II

FEATURES: mainly 12 liters and 3 liters piece 15 DIN / INT aluminum tanks—no adapter required. There are six rental equipment available on board—those who arrive without their own equipment, however, should pre-order rental equipment.

PRICE EXAMPLE: 9 nights on board (one dive Coiba and 5 days diving Malpelo), including 3 to 4 dives per day, VP, water, soft drinks, tea, coffee, snacks, round trip transfer to Panama City from US\$3,600, plus National Park fee (1 \$20 x 5 x 85 Coiba and Malpelo) = \$445 plus transfer airport/hotel/airport: \$35 Total: \$4,080.

FUEL SURCHARGE of \$100 is added if the oil price (Brent) of \$100 per barrel. A barrel of oil costs about \$120 will be charged a surcharge of \$160.

WEBSITE:
www.coibadiveexpeditions.com

PROS:

- Unique dive sites
- Stable and comfortable boat
- Excellent food
- Nitrox 32 additional charge
- Nautilus free Lifeline radio per diver

CONS:

- Long, arduous arrival
- Only suitable for seaworthy, advanced divers
- High cost of Malpelo National Park (USD\$85/day)



Whitetip reefsharks are not so common, like on Cocos Island

the major fish stocks that need to be protected at all cost. Located on the barren main island, a small Colombian military unit is stationed, which in recent years has acted on several occasions as an armed force against illegal long-line fishing. In addition, the few dive boats operating locally offer the sharks a little bit of protection, as the divers are vigilant and report to the base any ship that appears in the reserve. Unfortunately, they are not always equipped with a patrol boat.

One must be aware that the exclusiveness of the diving here is due to the low traffic of dive boats -- there are just five dive boats that have permission to operate in Malpelo. However, they are not allowed to operate simultaneously but sequentially.

Because of this rule, only one dive boat at a time is allowed to anchor at permanent buoys.

Of course, not everyone is so spectacular dive from Malpelo as described above, but in fact has just taken place without any exaggeration! On the agenda are meetings with the various schools of fish, groups of grouper, eagle rays, and also almost always on nearly every dive, hammerhead sharks. These range the seas mostly in large schools of up to a hundred animals and head directly to the many cleaning stations on the reef where they can get the full treatment from cleaner fish and shrimp.

Diving

When diving the seas around Malpelo, protective gloves are

recommended. Because you will want to see hammerhead sharks and it is not comfortable just floating through the reef, you will want to cling onto current-protected rocks covered with barnacles that have sharp edges. Furthermore, a large surface marker buoy is recommended, along with a 20-meter-long duty reel, if possible. A strong current breaks away from the reef, so there is a need to be able to have at depth a buoy shot immediately to the surface to mark your location. Diving here can be tedious and is certainly not for beginners, but diligent divers are often rewarded with unusual sightings.

The crossing from Panama to Malpelo takes a whopping 30 hours, and the Pacific Ocean is certainly not known to be



as still as a glassy lake. It is thus only recommended for die-hard divers -- at least bring your seasickness tablets in your pack. Since the tour is usually combined with Coiba, the first stage after eight hours of driving is done.

Travel only about 20 miles off Panama's coastal island group, and the area is still completely unknown. During the last Ice Age, the 27,000-square-kilometer archipelago of 38 islands was still connected to the mainland. The huge main island of Coiba is often referred to as the world's largest uninhabited tropical coral island and definitely has the largest coral reef of the eastern Pacific.

The diversity of the national park and UNESCO World Heritage Site is enormous both above and below the water. It boasts untouched tropical rain forests with a lot of endemic species such as unique

howler monkeys, opossums and white-tailed deer, but also crocodiles and numerous bird species, plus miles of snow-white sand beaches and river systems that can be explored by kayak.

There are about 30 dive sites in the park, which promise sensational encounters with schools of mobulas, cow-nosed rays, huge schools of fish, but also frogfish, sharks and turtles. In fact, whale sharks have been seen more frequently between Coiba and Malpelo than before. Another highlight is that

over 1,000 humpback whales come here to give birth and then to mate again from July to October.

Dive season Malpelo is an all season destination, but divers will find different



A surface marker buoy with a long reel is an absolute must-have for diving on Malpelo; Diver and corals on the rocky reef (top)

Large spiny lobsters are seen very common; Dive boat, *Yemaya II* (right); School of barracuda in crystal clear water (top)



highlights in each season.

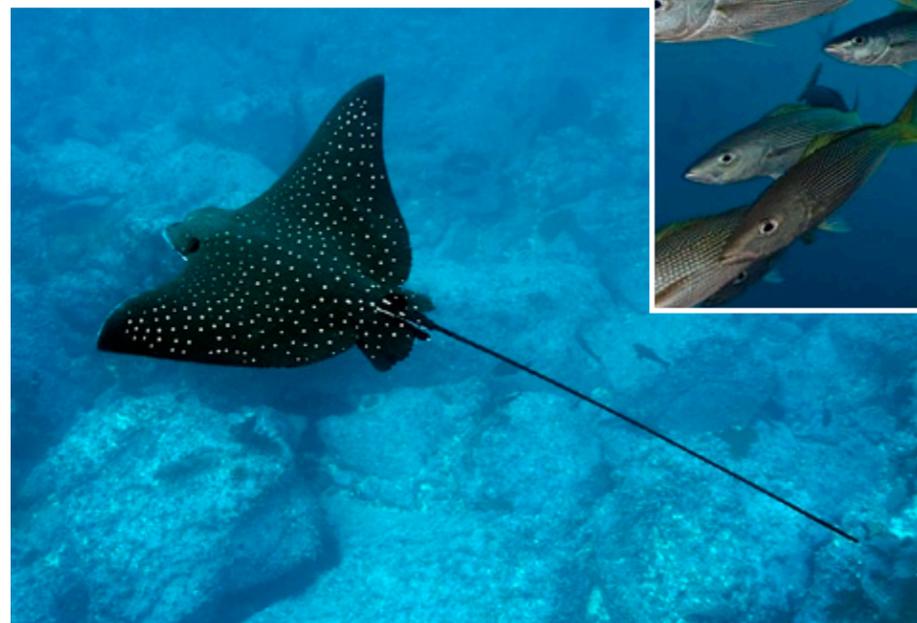
- Large schools of silky sharks (Silky Shark): May to early August.
- Large schools of hammerhead sharks: year-round, best from January to April.
- The rare sand tiger sharks (below 50 to 60 meters!) (Smalltooth Sand Tiger Shark, *Odontaspis ferox*): January to April.
- Whale sharks are kept on all year around Coiba and Malpelo. The best chance you have to see them is from July to September.
- As a bonus, come July-November to find over 1,000 humpback whales in the

waters of Coiba giving birth to young and mating.

Visibility can fluctuate within hours, between ten and well over 30 meters. The best chance for quiet seas is in March and April.

Water temperatures fluctuate throughout the year at the surface, between 26-28°C. There is a thermocline at significantly cooler, deeper water, but it can fluctuate from day to day. It increases from January to April from up to 25 meters to 15 meters. It is usually a little colder than 22°C under the thermocline; from January to April, temperatures may even drop to 15°C. One is usually best equipped with a 5-7mm suit and optional ice vest with hood.

It may all sound like insider's tips, but your dives can also be really sensational. However, one also needs to have a bit of luck. Visibility is generally much more modest in the park than on Malpelo and can often fall back to a few meters. That in this case, neither the past



Booby looking for fish

perhaps, or the giant whale shark floating school on skates or even a mother whale with calf gets to face is obvious.

Malpelo is undoubtedly one of the top ten of the world's best shark and big fish-regions. Seaworthiness, a minimum level of fitness as well as some diving experience—mainly current—is strongly

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Malpelo, a group of islands and rocks 500km from the coast; Several moray eels sharing one cave; Snappers; Eagle ray; Scorpionfish



Malpelo



THIS PAGE: On a jungle tour in Panama you find at least three different species of monkeys, colorful insects and fresh water turtles. Location of Malpelo Island on global map

recommended. A trip combining Malpelo with Coiba is definitely worthwhile. You will have the added chance of experiencing sensational dives around Coiba, too.

Top dive sites

Washing Machine. At this site, divers swim over several rocky shoals at the Isla Coiba Jicaron before getting to a minimum depth of ten meters. There are many schools of surgeonfish, jacks and snapper, but also colorful sea fans, anemones and bright yellow lionfish. Groupers, moray eels, eagle rays, whitetip reef sharks, hammerheads and whale sharks are often found. Very strong currents.

La Nevera. This site is located at a stepped, sloping cliff on Malpelo's west coast. The Spanish, La Nevera, refers to the refrigerator-cold deep currents that often attract large schools of hammerhead

sharks to two cleaning stations here at about 20 meters. In addition, there are many moray eels, groupers, stingrays and Galapagos sharks. Very noticeable swell.

Altar de Virginia. This site is located in a 12-meter-deep bay on the east side of Malpelo, near the pier. With a little luck, you can watch up close schools of hammerhead sharks coming to cleaning stations in shallow water. In addition, there are often eagle rays, a large school of barracuda, turtles and Galapagos sharks patrolling the area. Outside the bay, there are often strong currents.

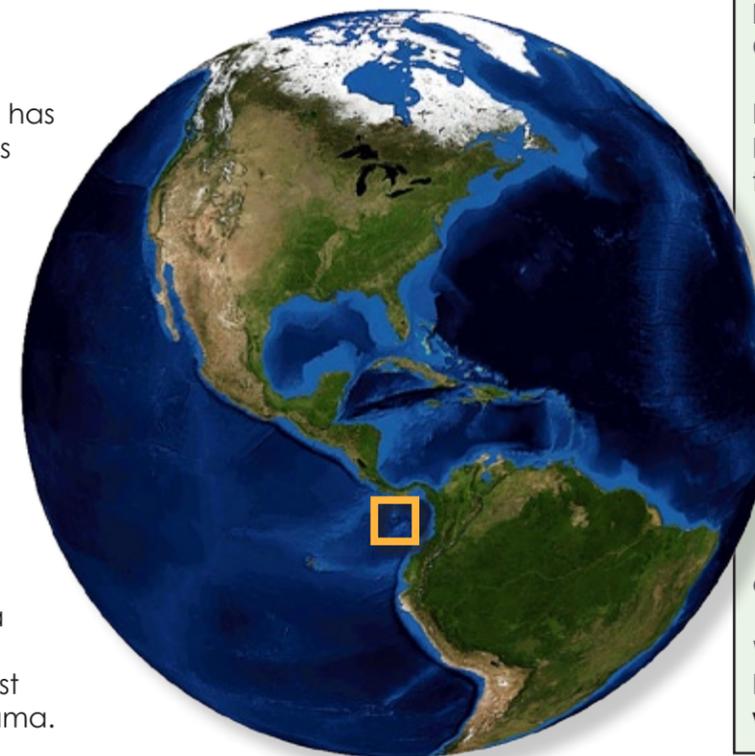
Topside excursions

If desired, you can climb a rope ladder hanging on a metal bridge and climb Malpelo. The barren rocky island is about 300 meters high and houses a small ranger station, a myriad of sea birds and a few

endemic lizards.

Coiba is far more diverse. The largest uninhabited tropical island in the world has very rich flora and fauna with numerous endemic species. As an alternative program to diving, there is trekking by kayak along the rivers of the original, pristine rain forest or walking on deserted white sandy beaches.

Before or after the safari, it is well worth the extra time to spend a few days in Panama. One can enjoy short expert-guided sightseeing tours of Panama Canal, city tours in Panama City, rainforest excursions on foot or by canoe as well as multi-day expeditions in the cloud-enshrouded forests of the highlands or a trip to visit the Kuna Yala Indians on the Caribbean side of the country organized by the Swiss ecologist Rainald Framhein (www.yalatourspanama.com). ■



NASA

FACT FILE

GETTING THERE We took Condor Airlines from Frankfurt to Panama City, with a short stopover in the Dominican Republic (about 12 hours). Usually one night is required before one goes on the four-hour bus ride to Puerto Mutis. *The Yemaya II* departs from this tiny river port, located about ten kilometers from the mouth of the river.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS Passport (valid at least six months). EU citizens do not need a visa to travel to Panama.

CURRENCY Balboa, linked 1:1 to the U.S. dollar. In fact, there are currently only Balboa coins. Legal tender is, in fact, the U.S. dollar. On the ship, one may pay in U.S. dollars or euros, but only in cash.

COMMUNICATIONS Tri-band capable cell phones work in Panama. The ship usually gets no cell phone reception. For an additional charge, however, a satellite phone is available. Internet is available in Panama City.

DECOMPRESSION CHAMBER Panama City. Due to the distance from Malpelo, a rescue helicopter cannot be used. Conservative diving is therefore advised.

TIME GMT -6 hours (- 7 summer time)

CLIMATE Dry season is from mid-December to early May, and then the rainy season comes, with heavy rain only during the months of October and November.

WEBSITES
Panama Tourism
www.visitpanama.com



A Journey Beyond the Three Seas
Israel

Text by Andrey Bizyukin and Yakov Samovarov. Photos by Andrey Bizyukin, Yakov Samovarov and EPSON Red Sea



ANDREY BIZYUKIN



YAKOV SAMOVAROV

On my first flight to Israel, I stretched out in a comfortable chair on EL AL Airlines, enjoyed a kosher meal and reread notes by the famous Russian traveller and pioneer explorer, Afanasiy Nikitin (circa 1466-1472). Only on the approach to Tel Aviv did I suddenly realize how small a country Israel was, and that it bordered three seas. Now, I had a unique chance (just as the great Russian explorer did) to visit these three seas—the Red Sea, the Mediterranean Sea and the Dead Sea—all in one trip.

My acquaintance with the country began in Eilat—Israel's southernmost city. A line of quaint hotels stretched for several kilometers along the coast, and many dive centers were located here. One can find excellent places for diving at the northernmost end of the Gulf of Aquaba on the Red Sea.

With my dive buddy, Yakov Samovarov, I would dive the missile wreck, *Satil*. I asked Yakov to tell me about the day's dive. "Six or seven years ago, I did my first dive on *Satil*," said Yakov. "It was formally known as the Israeli Navy missile boat with the proud name of *Sufa* (Storm)."

In 1993, *Sufa* was decommissioned from the Navy and sunk in Eilat as an artificial reef. All military equipment was taken out before this procedure. Now, the ship rests on a level keel very close to shore.

The bow of the *Satil* is located at 18m,

the stern, at 21m, with a maximum depth of 24m. The ship has long been overgrown with a thick layer of algae and corals. Inside and around the vessel are darting swarms of sea bass, barracuda, lionfish and rays. Beginners can dive to the top of the wreck, and experienced divers are allowed to penetrate the interior.

We arrived at the Marina Divers club, unloaded the gear from the car, drank some water, heaved our scuba gear onto our backs and headed out to the sea via a cozy beach. The beach crowd slurped ice drinks through straws. Sunbathers lounged in deck chairs under sun umbrellas and looked with interest at the men in black wetsuits, fins in hand and scuba gear on their backs.

We were "men in black", bent under the weight of our equipment, moving in a chain, like ants, eagerly heading

Diver and anthias on coral (above) and with sergeant majors and cornetfish (right), Red Sea, Israel
PREVIOUS PAGE: Underwater photographer and lionfish





ANDREY BIZYUKIN

THIS PAGE: Scenes from the wreck of the *Sufa*

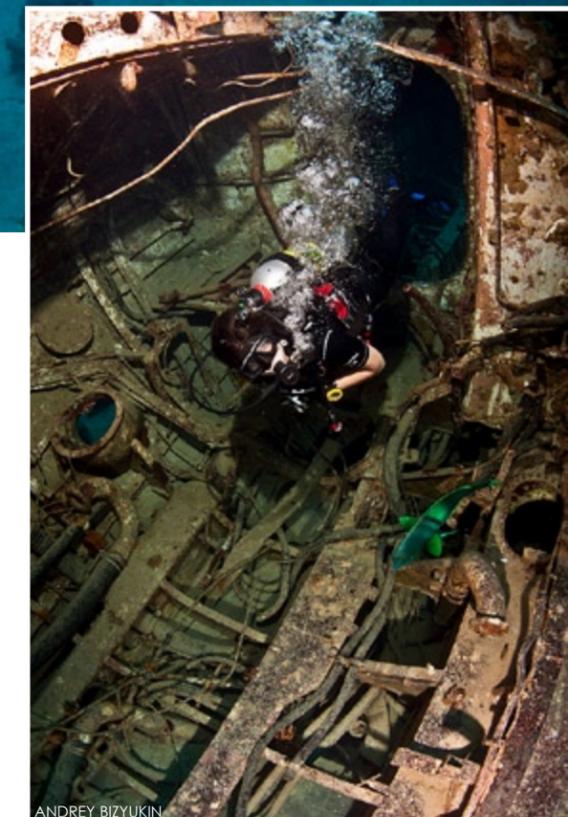
antennae protruded from deep cracks.

In the corner of my eye, I noticed a small white headed snake eel, but there was no time to consider it. I had to catch up and hang out in the wake of a couple of dozen divers kicking their fins, when a huge ship appeared suddenly out of the blue shadows.

It stood exactly on its keel,

and at this point, the deck could not be seen. For some reason, the Flying Dutchman came to mind. In some places, the vessel's rusty sides had had time to acquire hard corals—poles, shrouds and the mast were lushly overgrown with bushes of white and reddish-brown soft corals.

We got to the bow of the wreck, the upper deck, at a depth of 18m. As experience div-



ANDREY BIZYUKIN

towards the water. I couldn't help but think what a shame it was that the sun worshippers we passed would not see all the beauty that could be found in the underwater world.

The wreck of the *Satil* was located 90m from shore. Diving there was easy, even for a novice. A striped, red and white buoy marked the location of the wreck. The first time you go, you should probably bring a compass for direction. Frankly speaking, finding a 45-meter ship underwater is usually easy, but here, it's

almost impossible. I say almost, because from time to time, there have been cases where divers have managed it without a compass.

We got in line with Sasha, our dive guide, as two links in the chain of divers entering the water. Sasha had warned me that the bottom was rocky, with a lot of large slippery boulders, so I had better to go slowly, especially if there were waves on the surface, and my hands were busy steadying the equipment. We submerged in the water to our

waists, donned our flippers, spit into our masks to avoid misting, placed our mouthpieces, exchanged okay signals and dived.

We started the dive from a shallow place and quickly reached a steep slope. The depth increased rapidly. At a depth of 10 meters, a small cliff rose two meters from the bottom, covered with corals and shoals of colorful fish scurrying around. White boxer shrimp with long



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THIS PAGE:
Scenes from
the *Sufa*
wreck

Inflated
puffer-
fish (left);
Parrotfish
(below);
Spotted
sea snake
(bottom)

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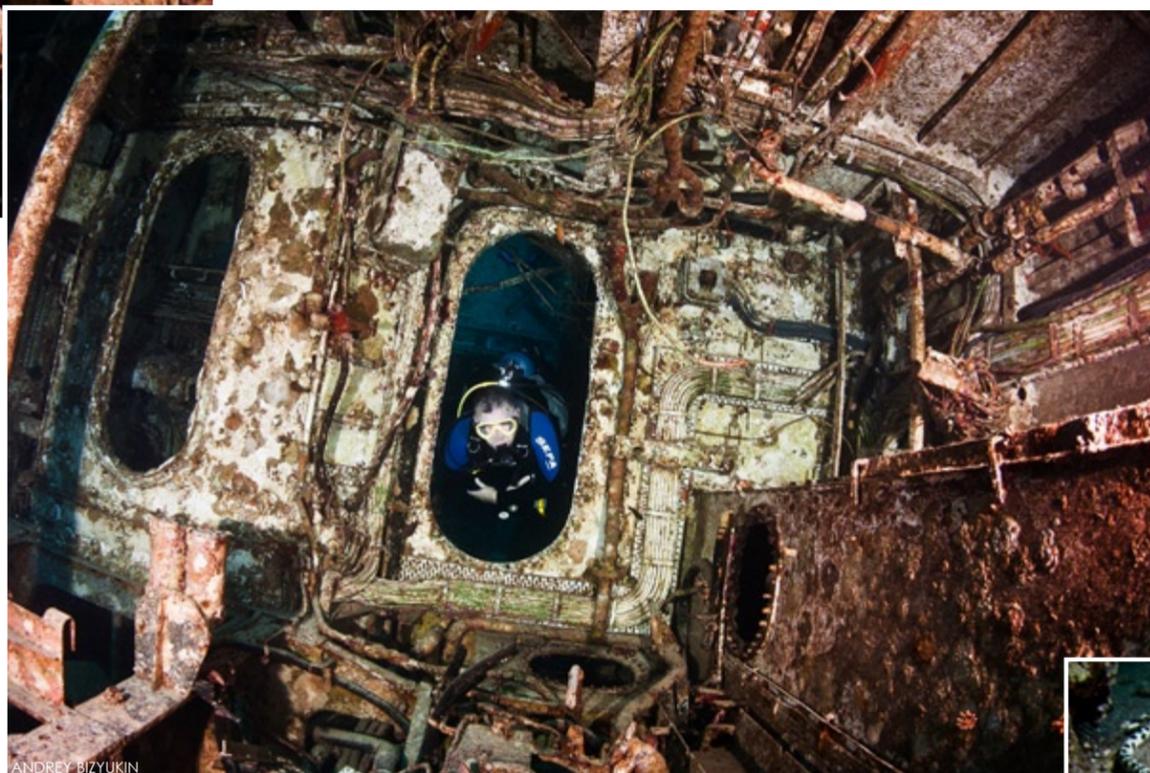
ers, we first inspected the round hole in the bow. This was the position for a 76mm cannon. On the stern, there were two large rectangular cutouts; these were the positions for the missile systems.

It was nice to see so many divers underwater. Some of them swam towards the ship, some swam back. There were divers with single cylinders and twinsets, with nitrox and trimix, with underwater scooters and rebreathers. It felt like a group of European diving elite had gathered here underwater in Eilat.

We looked at the wreck from all sides, climbed up into the hold, inspected the crew cabins and the captain's wheel cabin. We stopped to enjoy the spectacular views of soft red corals. We took pictures. It was a great wreck!

On the way back to the shore, we observed colorful tropical fishes living in coral trees, chasing a striped sea snake, swimming in a flock of curious, striped fish.

When I was on my way back to the



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back to Manta Diving center (the hosting dive center of the Epson Red Sea competition) to change my cylinders, I met a company of cheerful divers: men on a creative scouting trip with underwater photo and video cameras and made-up models dressed in brightly colored ball

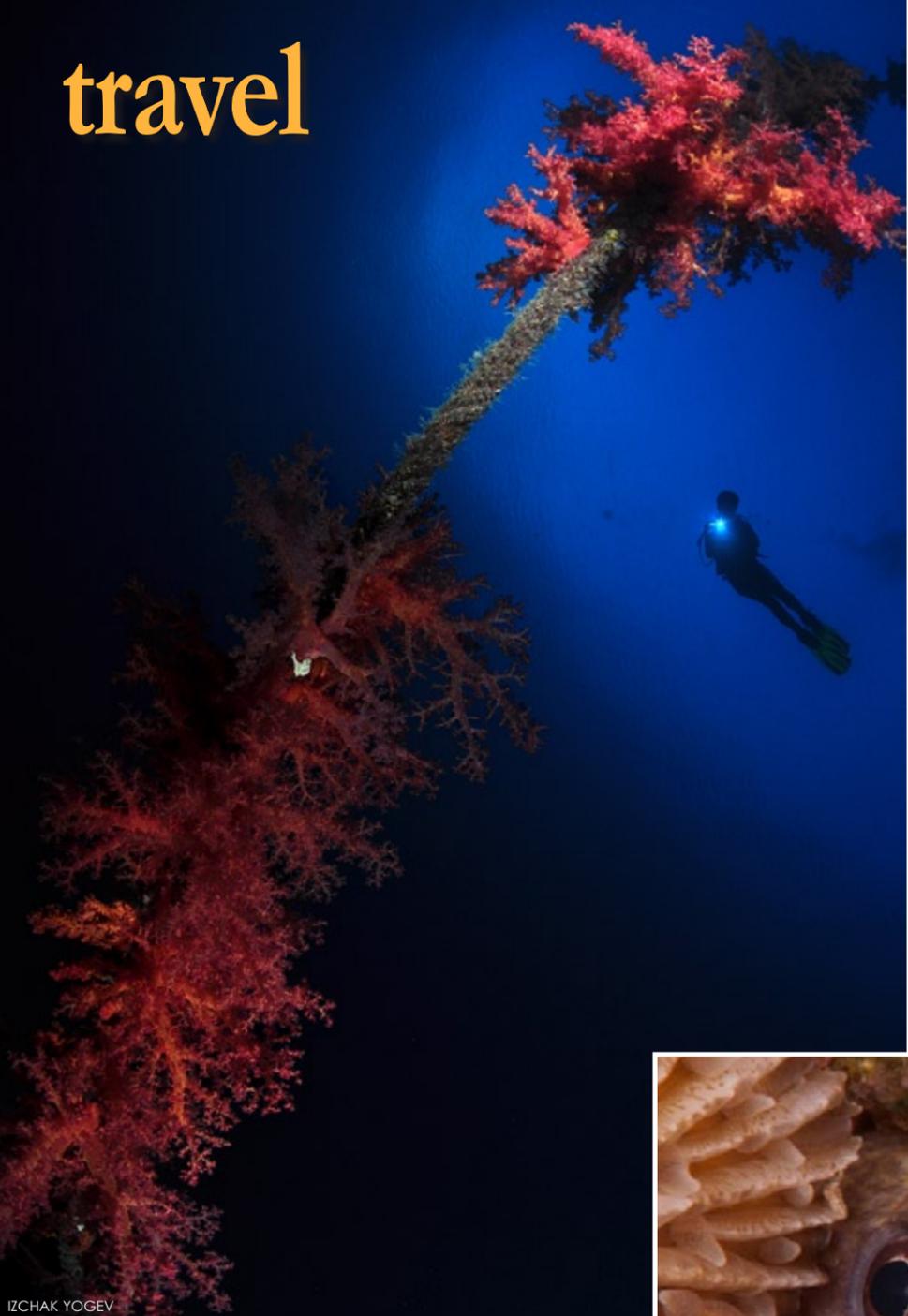
gowns and stylish, fashionable clothing. We started talking, and it turned out that the Epson Red Sea competition was going right now, here in Eilat, and all my new friends were participants in this grand event—the



YAKOV SAMOVAROV



ANDREY BIZYUKIN



IZCHAK YOGEV



AMIR STERN



ESTEBAN TORE



AMIR STERN

Moray eels (above) and spotted boxfish (top) by Amir Stern, Israel, \$10,000 first prize winner and Corals (top left) by Izchak Yogev, Israel, second prize winner of Five Images Category; Goby (center) by Esteban Tore, Spain, first prize winner of Best Singular Image, ERS 2011



Israel

ALEX VANZETTI

Fashion shot (above) by Alex Vanzetti, Israel, second prize winner and (right) by Vitalii Sokol, Russia, third prize winner in the Fish & Fashion Five Images Category, Epson Red Sea 2011

choose the right place; the Red Sea coast near Eilat was a perfect fit. Pilosof collected the most authoritative international jury. With the credibility of Pilosof and a huge number of his friends, the event has managed to grow without too much difficulty. Upon finding sponsors and money, everything began to turn around, and when Epson Europe joined the festival as a sponsor the festival got a new name—Epson Red Sea.

Today, Epson Red Sea is the joint project of Pilosof and Epson. The next competition takes place 4-10 November 2012. They have a prize fund of US\$100,000 dollars, a large number of partners and



VITALII SOKOL

international festival of underwater photography, video and fashion held annually in Israel.

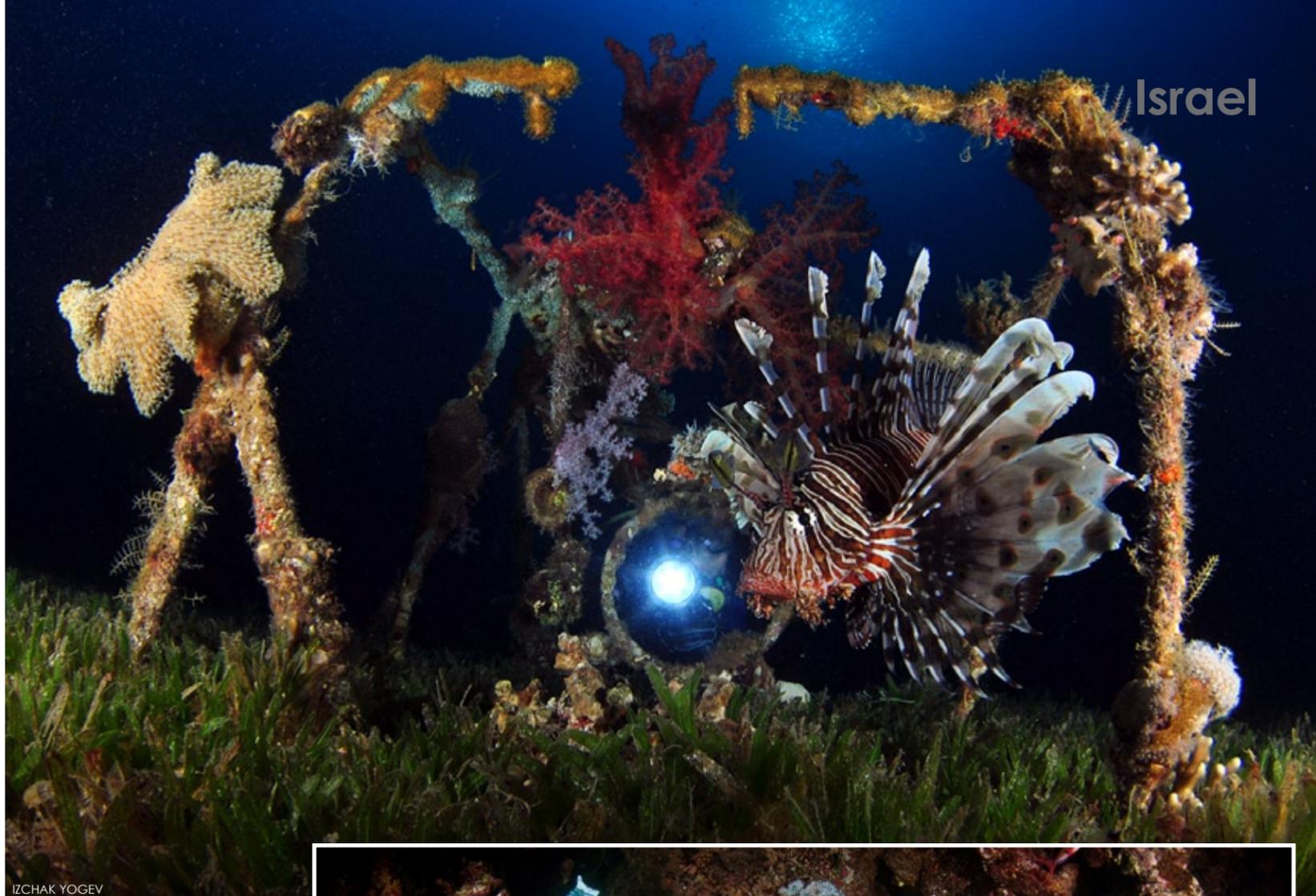
Epson Red Sea 2011

Several years ago, David Pilosof, a renowned underwater photographer of Israel, decided to organize a festival of underwater photography, but in a completely new format. The festival would be interesting and attract visitors and participants—talented underwater photographers—from all over the world.

For this purpose, it was necessary to



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IZCHAK YOGEV



YAKOV SAMOVAROV

Corals (top right) by Izchak Yogev, Israel, second prize winner of Five Images Category, Epson Red Sea 2011

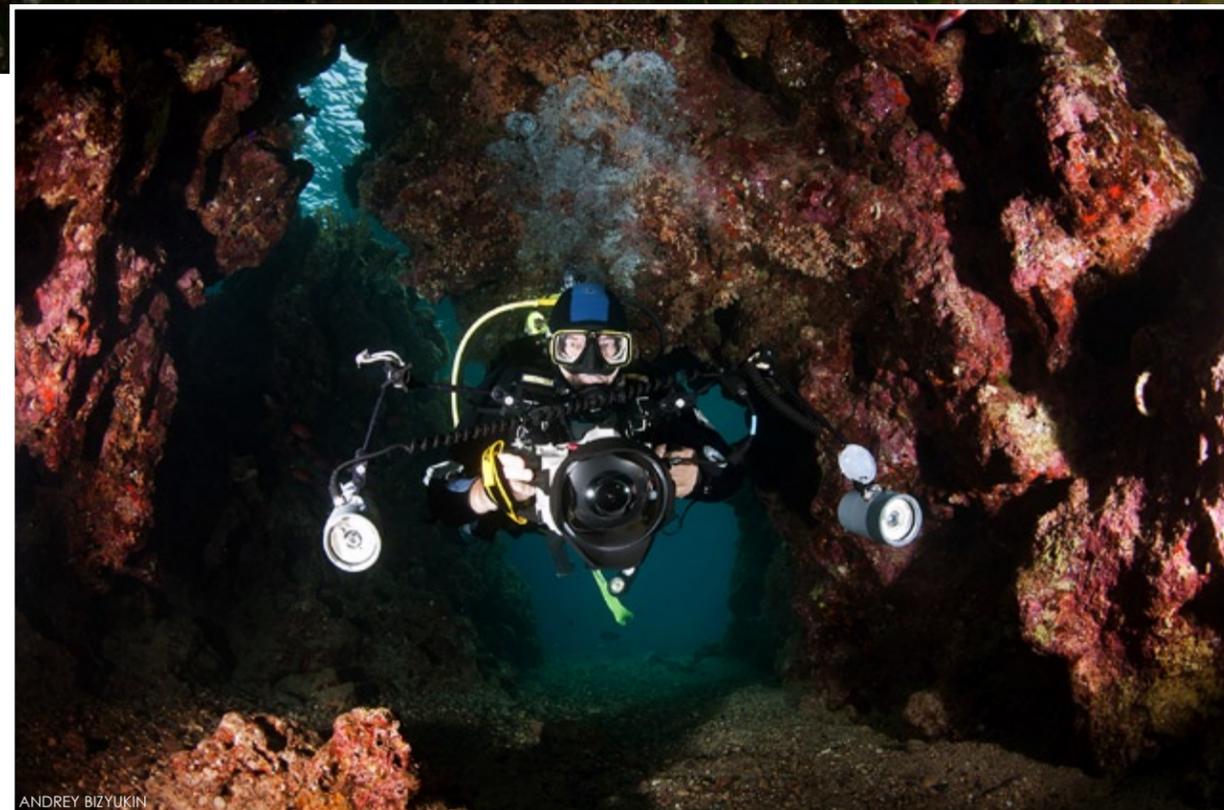
participants from around the world. In order to participate in the event, underwater photographers choose a suitable category for their project, and during the few days of the festival's shoot-out, they have to capture images of the underwater world of Eilat. The categories listed in 2011 included: Five Images (series of five photographs), Best Singular Image, Amateurs (for beginners), Children of Epson Red Sea (images by kids), Fish and Fashion, Fish of the Year, Jury's Prize, The Mayor's Prize, and Video.

In 2012, for the first time, there will be the National Team category. "Each team participating in the National Team category should consist of three photographers from the same country, competing in the Eilat Shoot-Out," said Pilosof. "Photographers can team up independently. Alternatively, photographers can inquire at the competition office about other photographers from their country partic-

ipating in the Eilat Shoot-Out for the purpose of joining forces. There is no restriction on the number of teams originating from the same country." For more information, interested photographers can visit www.eilatredsea.com.

The Red Sea at Eilat

Eilat's underwater world is full of life, and it is extraordinarily diverse. There are many colonies of hard and soft corals scattered along the bottom, attracting a variety of fabulously colorful tropical fish. One can find moray eels, groupers, lionfish, parrotfish, needlefish, rays and underwater snakes, puffers, glassfish, etc.—the typical Red Sea inhabitants. There is always clear, warm water, an absence of strong currents and convenient, easily accessible shore diving, which makes Eilat a favorite place to dive for underwater photographers at any level.



ANDREY BIZYUKIN

THIS PAGE: Scenes from the Red Sea at Eilat, Israel. Diver in coral encrusted swim-through (above) Diver and coral garden (top left); Striped nudibranch on red sponge (left)



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Israel



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THIS PAGE: Scenes from the desert near Eilat; Bedouin hospitality (right) tea and flat bread; Heading out to the desert on camels (left)

secrets of the professionals, as well as skills of the best masters of underwater photography from America, Europe and Asia.

During break times between dives and before the official gala awards ceremony, we visited with our new friends the ancient copper mines of King Solomon located just an hour's drive from Eilat. What amazing rock formations—works of wind and water over thousands of years.

In this place, there was a collection of archaeological sites, ancient rock paintings excavated in the ancient world's

smelters, and traces of the thousand-year-old process of the development of humankind. In the past, it was a land full of life. Now, it is a mercilessly sun-scorched desert. There are just a few centimeters of rain for year.

Today, this land is the home of the Bedouins. They provide camel rides for tourists and offer tea and cakes cooked over an open fire.

This amazing archaeological park with its exotic red rock landscape was disturbing in a way, providing



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glimpses into our genetic memory and ancient civilizations. It did not leave anyone indifferent.

We said our goodbyes to our new found colleagues and photographer mates. We had become good friends over these three unforgettable days of diving, and we all had fallen forever in love with the underwater world of Eilat. For me, now, it was time to head north to the Dead Sea.





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The Dead Sea

—How to become a world champion deep sea diver

The opinion exists that the Dead Sea is one of the most saline seas of the world. The salinity of the water is 310ppm, which is almost ten times more salty than ocean water. To dive here, you have to put on about ten times more weight on your weight belt. The whole set of equipment for diving in the Dead Sea will weigh from 65 to 70kg

depending on the weight and size of the diver. Despite glum thoughts about the very heavy weight, I have indeed been able to look at the Dead Sea far below the waves.

Our encyclopedic, erudite guide, Irad, told us that the water of most rivers in the region is now almost entirely used to irrigate agricultural fields in Jordan, but in times past, they filled the Dead Sea. That is why the level of the Dead Sea is falling dramatically—about one meter per year. The current level of the Dead Sea is 420 meters below sea level and the standard sea level of the Baltic Sea.

THIS PAGE: Scenes from the Dead Sea. Photographers can only take top side shots because of the high salt content of the water, which corrodes camera gear

Water is drying up, and the sea is becoming more and more salty. The huge concentration of rare minerals makes this a unique water source for rare and valuable chemicals. Here at the Dead Sea in Israel is the largest factory for the extraction and purification of chemical elements from supersaturated salt sea water. However, prolonged exposure to water of such super saturation can corrode skin and can cause severe burns to the eyes and mucous membranes. It is said that this water can corrode metal and even the rubber seals of underwater cameras. Swimming and diving in this water becomes a real extreme activity, requiring special equipment that is resistant to chemically aggressive environments.

According to the authoritative opinion of *National Geographic*, the Dead Sea was included in the list of the seven wonders of the world in 2012.

We sank, descending deeper and deeper on a comfortable sled tethered to ropes, getting closer and closer to the floor of the Dead Sea. As experienced divers, we knew we had to equalize the pressure in our ears as often as possible in order to reach a depth of 420m. To get to this incredible depth, I did this countless times. Finally, after a half an hour descent, we got to the bottom of a huge valley near the bottom of this legendary sea.

The sea was stormy, even at a depth of 420m. The entire coast line and the slopes into the sea, visible from the shore and disappearing into the depths, were covered with a thick layer of large



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THIS PAGE: Scenes from Jerusalem. View from Mount of Olives (left). Inside the prayer hall of the Western Wall (right); Wailing Wall (below); Prayer room in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (below left)

dense that one did not even need to move one's arms or legs to stay afloat. Like an unsinkable boat, a person could easily, effortlessly float on the surface of this super saturated salt brine.

We had to be very careful not to splash water and avoid getting water in our eyes and on our lips. A total dive time of only 15 minutes was considered safe and recommended by doctors. Then, we had to come back

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to the shore very carefully, trying not to injure our arms and legs on the sharp salt crystals along the sea's edge. Freshwater showers were highly recommended after the dive in order to save our skin from dehydration and becoming hypertensive to the chemically aggressive solution of the sea.

Finally, the long awaited sweet moment of glory came. The dive record was set: the deepest dive—420 meters—carried out on a sled. It was worth it to take the calculated risks for this very heroic moment.

Jerusalem

We continued our trip to the north end of the country and made a stop at the

watershed area between the Dead Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. We stayed for a day in Jerusalem, one of the oldest cities in the world. It's the city of three major world religions and the capital of the Israeli state.

Making our way through the narrow streets of Old Town, between lots of souvenir shops and high-profile promotional offers, we got to the holy places.

The Wailing Wall—the western wall of the temple of King Solomon—was built over 3,000 years ago. It is sacred to all Jewish people, a place where people prayed in the days of King David. Today, the faithful here, as they did many hundreds of years ago, asked for their deepest wishes, putting little notes in the

salt crystals sparkling in the sunlight.

But despite the frightening stories told by our guide, it was impossible for us to miss out on the incredible opportunity here. The vain desire to feel like pioneer-

ing deep-sea divers pushed us to take a desperate risk, and so, we dove in.

One by one, we tried to dive into this magical sea. The water was so



THIS PAGE:
Ruins of
Caesarea,
the ancient
port of King
Herod, not far
from Tel Aviv

north to Tel Aviv—the
second capital of the
Israeli state. Here, the
famous restaurant and
bar, Nanuchka, gave us
the happy opportunity to
experience the night life of
Tel Aviv—an unforgettable
experience for each guest.
With original music, danc-
ing, decorations, food,



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cracks between the stones of the ancient walls. The feeling of holiness in this place was almost palpable. Prayer did not stop here; it went on all day and all night.

The Church of the Holy Sepulcher is the site that has attracted Christian pilgrims from around the world for centuries. It is believed to be the location of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ as well as the place of Christ's burial and resurrection—both the hill upon which Christ was crucified (Golgotha, or Calvary) and the ancient cave where

Jesus' body was laid after removal from the cross. Another sacred place is the Mount of Olives—believed by early Christians to be the site from which Jesus ascended into heaven. Over the centuries, its slopes have been covered with countless tombs—some of the world's most expensive. Today, it is one of the most prestigious cemeteries on Earth.

The Mediterranean Sea at Caesaria

After Jerusalem, our way led farther



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THIS PAGE: Divers explore remnants of ancient ship wrecks in Mediterranean Sea. Jordan River (right) and friendly otter on shore

drinks, and joyful communion in such a friendly atmosphere of good will, it would be difficult to find a similarly creative organization of night entertainment anywhere else in Europe or Asia.

The morning after our evening city tour, we traveled not far from Tel Aviv to the town of Caesarea—the ancient port of King Herod. There were a lot of rare historical artifacts at the bottom of a shallow enclosed bay built here in Roman times. All these objects were being studied by underwater archeologists.

We dived with an experienced guide. The water temperature was cool—21-22°C. Visibility was about three meters. In order not to get lost in such troubled waters, we had to stick



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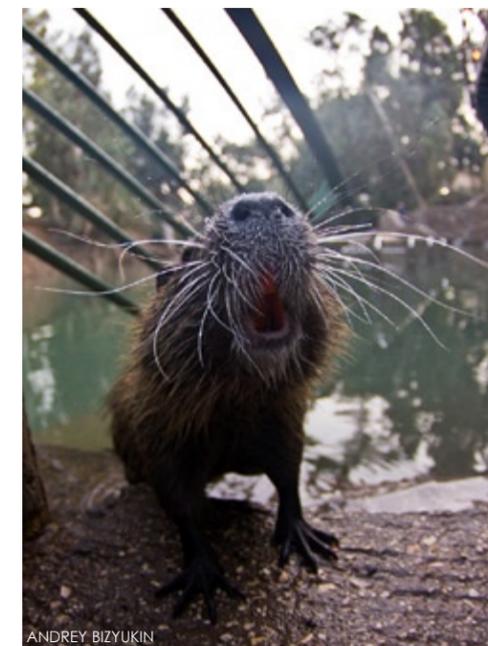
with the group. We found an ancient marble column not so

far from the royal palace. It had fallen into the sea from aboard a Roman galley over 2,000 years ago. Now, only curious divers and fish were visitors of this exotic underwater museum. We had a great opportunity to admire its grandiose size and excellent quality of marble.

Despite the relaxed feeling of being in a museum, the muddy and cold water made diving here quite extreme. Lagging behind a couple of minutes to take pictures, I got distracted, lost track of our dive guide and immediately got lost in the muddy water. I had a long swim alone among the piles of ancient stones, old anchors and remnants of sunken ships. Only in open sea, in a strong sea swell, did I finally catch up with my friends, finally. They were busy—enthusiastically involved in taking shots among numerous underwater rock ridges.

Jordan River

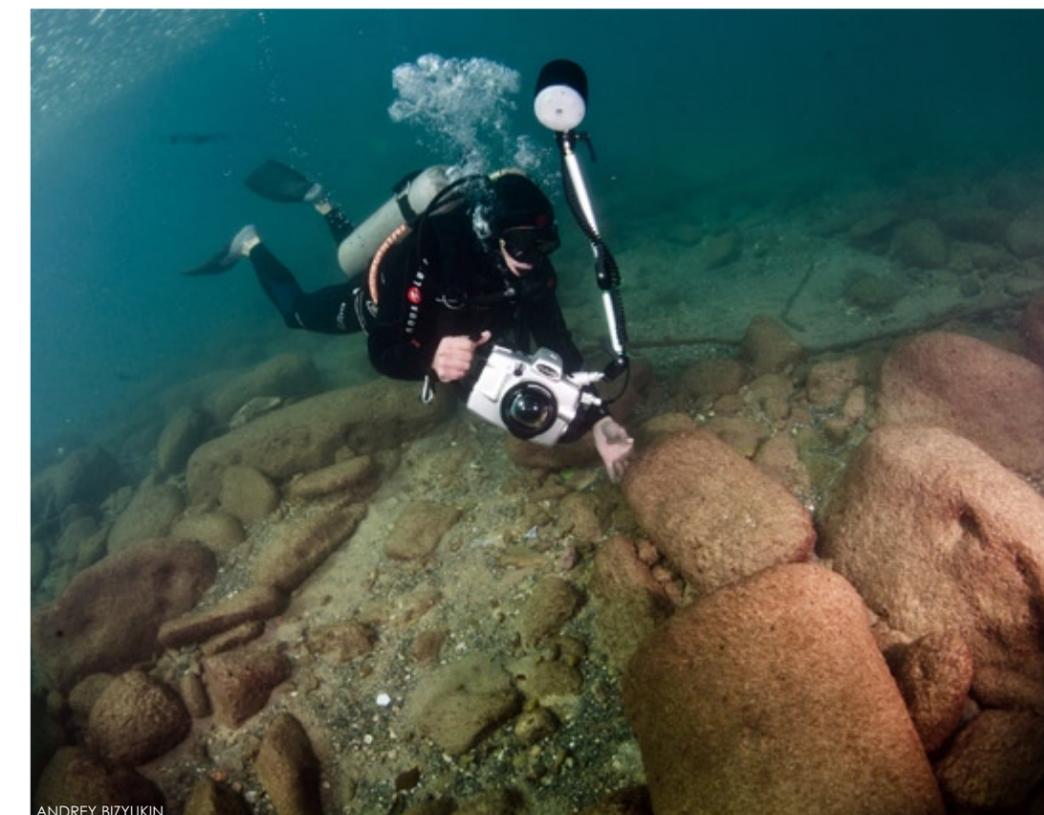
Continuing on our trip north, we spotted the Golan Heights



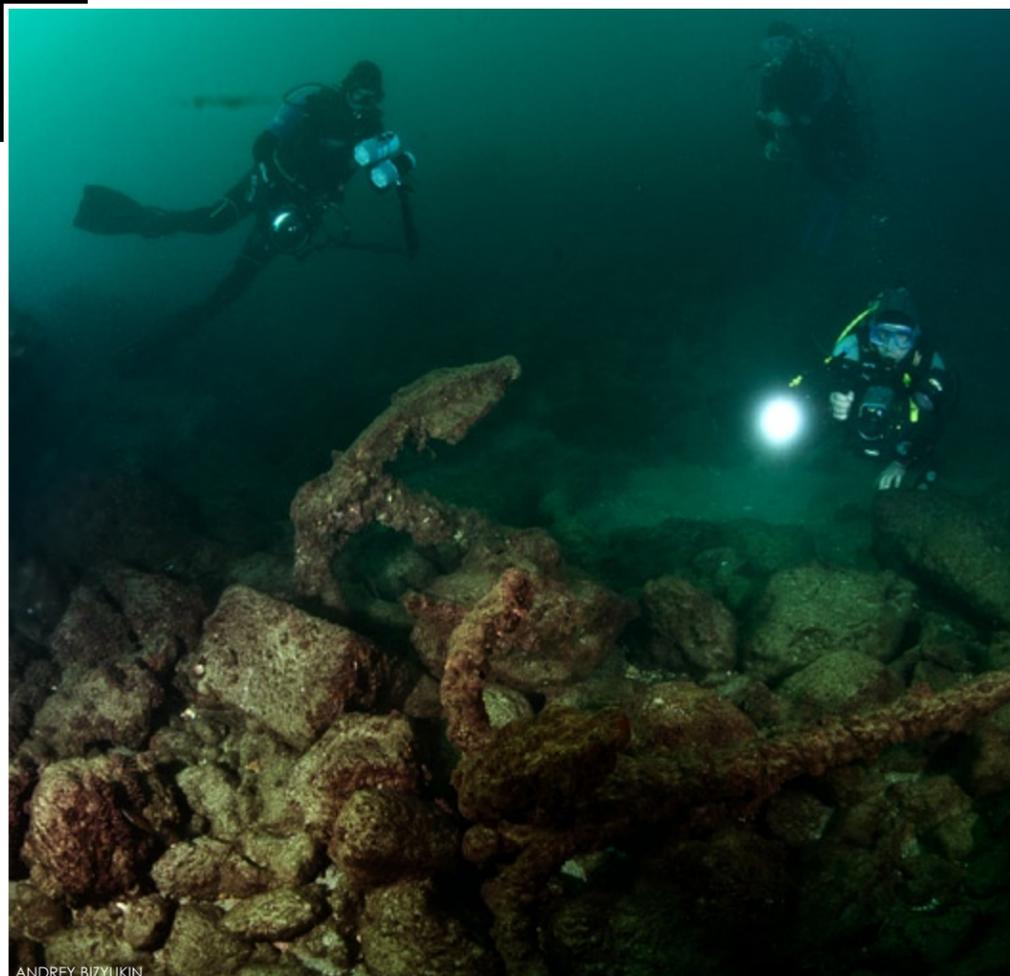
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in the distance near to where we would find the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River—two Christian holy places. These sites were considered holy because of the water. So, we thought there should be a lot of people who would want to immerse themselves in the holy water, underwater.

We investigated these loca-



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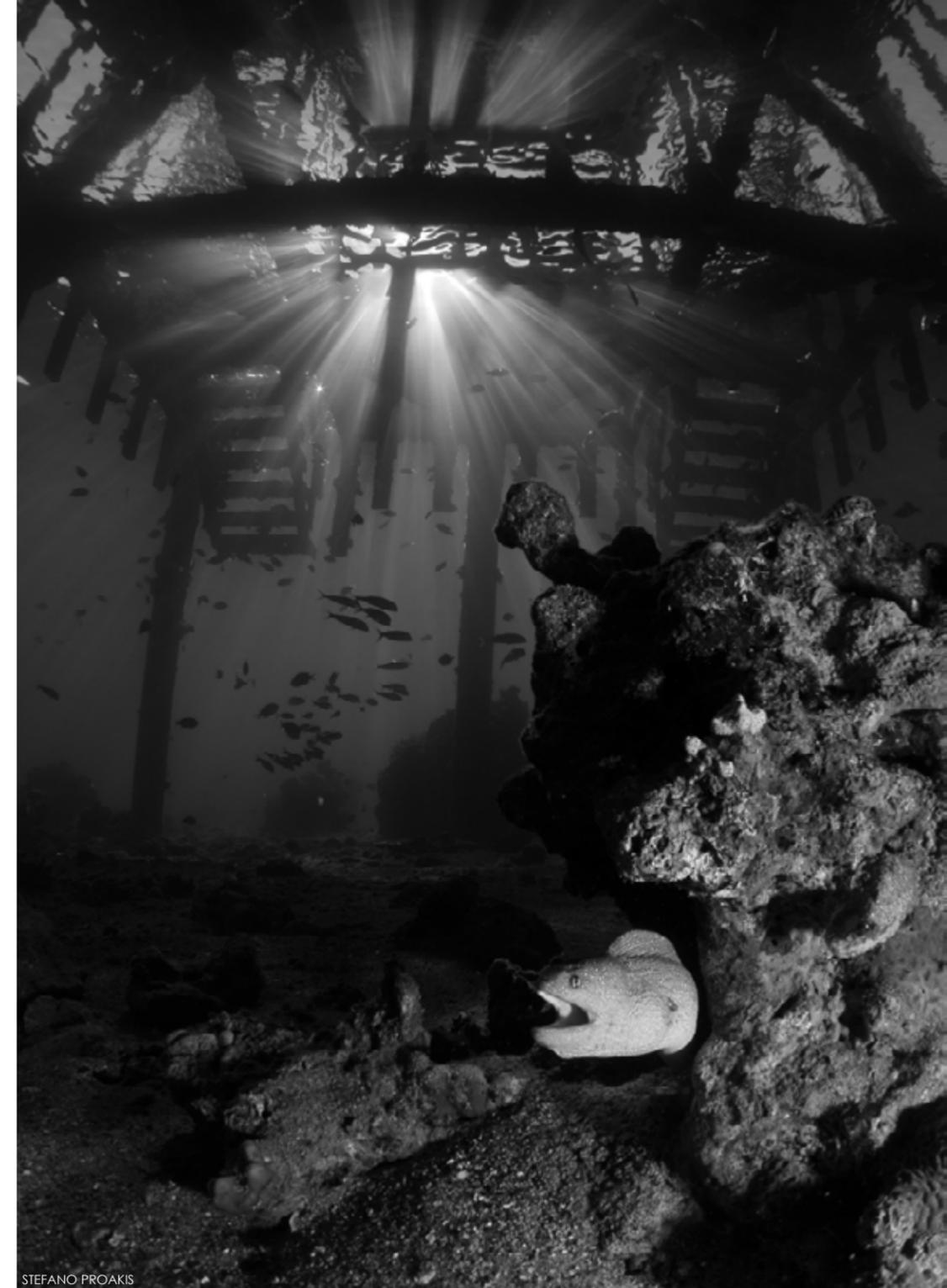




MARK FULLER



JOHANNE FELTEN



STEFANO PROAKIS

Diver and backlit corals (above) by Mark Fuller, Israel, third prize winner in Five Images Category, Epson Red Sea 2011; Fashion shot (above) by Johannes Felten, Israel, winner of \$2,000 Mayor's Prize and the \$2,000 first prize winner of the Fish & Fashion Five Images Category; Fish under pier (right) by Stefano Proakis, Italy, winner of \$5,000 Jury's Prize

tions for the presence of a diving infrastructure. But we were unsuccessful, and found the water of the Jordan River to be incredibly muddy. It was home to a lot of curious otters and catfish, totally unafraid of people. But diving here with scuba would only be possible through touch, as visibility was low to nil.

The house of St. Peter and the ruins of one of the oldest synagogues were

located right on the Sea of Galilee. The water here seemed much more transparent. We had an uncontrollable urge to dive here at least, but we couldn't find a dive center that would help us do so. After making an unsuccessful first reconnaissance trip, we had to just be satisfied with examining approaches to the water and making future plans to come back here again better prepared.

Afterthoughts

On the flight home, I stretched out my legs in a comfortable armchair on EL AL Airlines, enjoyed a kosher meal and flipped again through the travel notes of Afanasiy Nikitin. What else could the renowned explorer have written about this small intriguing country? Israel has absorbed centuries-old cultures, experience, knowledge and traditions of countless peoples

of the world. It has become an historical site, often over the centuries, a center for the suppression of cultural integration of world civilizations. What insights can one reach after a tour here beyond the three seas in these contemporary times? ■

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special thanks to Irad Fenichel (irad1@netvision.net.il)—a most encyclopedic, erudite guide who helped us to understand and appreciate the culture and traditions of Israel. Yakov Samovarov and associate editor Andrey Bizyukin are underwater photographers from Moscow, Russia.